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# The Luxury of a National Heritage: Dutch Heritage Strategies<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In a search for authenticity, preservation of and capitalisation on the brand heritage has marked previous decades. Fashion scholar Bruno Remaury has determined five key strategies through which luxury brand make use of the brand's past to give it value for the future: evoking the time of its origin, drawing on its stylistic repertoire, the use of its timeless emblems, an explicit juxtaposition between past and present, and applying museum methods to display a brand's heritage (Remaury, 2004).

Taking this theory as a starting point, and working within a Dutch context, this paper explores how one can legitimise a brand without an age-old heritage; when there is no past to relate to and no stylistic repertoire to draw on. Is it still possible to place yourself in a certain tradition and create a sense of longevity?

The Netherlands have only recently build up a fashion culture and as a result there are no luxury brands with a rich brand heritage. Nor has the nation itself a distinct fashion history or a narrative to refer to. Where some brands invent their own brand heritage, Dutch designers have applied an alternative strategy to place their products in a historical perspective: by drawing on their national heritage.

Juxtaposing the visual and narrative ways in which Dutch designers have made use of their national heritage with the strategies as employed by the established luxury fashion brands, reveals three main differences. While Dutch designers make use of the same strategies, the past they refer to is very different than that of the established luxury houses: they use a past from outside fashion –a national heritage instead of a brand heritage–, a past which is not necessarily connected to an elite culture –but in contrast to folk culture– and which endorses characteristics like timelessness and durability instead of the 'new', which is traditionally so central to fashion.

While these differences leave the question whether these Dutch brands aspire to position themselves as luxury brands, this paper substantiates the claim –based on Lipovetsky's *postmodern luxury*– that they do see and position themselves as luxury brands, but their concept of luxury is somewhat different than that of the time-honoured luxury brands.

## 1. Introduction

In an age where authenticity is a main objective, heritage has become the source of legitimacy for luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Hermes, or Chanel. Conservation and exploitation of brand heritage has characterised the previous decades. In his article *From the shop window to the museum: the relationship between a brand and its heritage*, Bruno Remaury (2004) states that the history of a luxury brand is first of all a strategic and stylistic reservoir, constituting what is put on offer for consumption. He describes five main strategies, which all make use of the brand's past to give it value for the present: evoking the time of its origin, drawing on its stylistic repertoire, the use of its timeless emblems, an explicit juxtaposition between past and present, and applying museum methods to display a brand's heritage.

But how do you legitimise your brand when you simply do not have a brand heritage to draw upon; when there is no past to refer to and no stylistic repertoire to put to good use? Is it still possible to place yourself in a certain tradition and create a sense of longevity?

Until the 1960s, the Netherlands have never seen themselves as a fashion country. The rich travelled to Paris to buy their clothes, the well-to-do ordered copies of Parisian models at a local 'maison' and the rest of the population made their own clothing after women's magazines patterns, which were simplifications of the latest Paris trends. And the same applies for ready-to-wear garments by the Dutch confec-

## Keywords

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National Heritage  
National Identity  
National Dress  
Dutch Fashion  
Luxury

tion industry. As a result there are no Dutch luxury brands with a rich, history-laden past. Nor has the nation itself a distinct fashion history or a fashion narrative to refer to, like for example the Italians or British do. A number of brands –such as Tod's, Hogan or Gérard Darel– have invented their own history and aura of legitimacy through for instance a fictional founder or a suggested relationship with icons such as Cary Grant or Jackie Kennedy (Erner, 2006: 78-82). By contrast, Dutch designers have in recent years applied an alternative strategy to place their products in a historical perspective: that is by drawing on their national heritage. Instead of referring to a brand history, or the fashion history of a country, the Dutch use their cultural history to give their products a sense of longevity.

This paper will explore the visual and narrative ways in which Dutch designers have made use of their national heritage in their designs and communication and juxtapose it with the strategies as employed by the established luxury fashion brands, like Louis Vuitton or Gucci. Through this I will demonstrate that, although Dutch designers use their national heritage instead of a brand heritage, their main strategies are the same as those of the luxury brands researched by Remaury. I will, however, also demonstrate that the Dutch conception of luxury accentuates a different element of *postmodern luxury*, as described by Lipovetsky (2007), than the established luxury houses.

## 2. The Past in the Present

The central question that Remaury asks himself in his article is: "What are the visual and narrative ways in which the heritage of a brand is put to use in the global strategy of the brand offer –from the products themselves to advertising and point of sale?" (Remaury, 2004, p.20). In the following I will ask myself the same question, but now within a specific Dutch context.

### Strategy 1: Evoking the time of its origin

Luxury brands often apply what Remaury calls the *logic of reconstitution*: they explicitly display elements, which have not a direct relation to the history of the brand, but evoke memories of another age in which the brand originated. So, through using stylistic features and décor they recreate an era and place the brand within this period (Remaury, 2004).

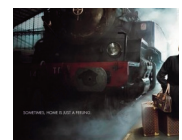
By using vintage cars or steam trains as a backdrop for their bags and suitcases, Louis Vuitton evokes memories of travelling in the 19th century, the era in which the brand was founded (Figures 1 & 2). While their 2007 advertisement has a polished and contemporary look, their 1994 advertisement also recreates the era by the used font type and the slightly blurred image, with (too) loud colours, which we associate with photochromic photographs –colorized images produced from black and white photography–, which were especially popular during the latter part of the 19th century, as modern colour photography was not yet commercially viable.

When we look at Dutch culture *the era* that the Dutch identify with most strongly is the Golden age of the 17th century, when the Dutch Republic experienced an economical and cultural florescence. Ever since the 'branding' of the Dutch nation during the early 19th century it is this era that is commonly seen as the age wherein the contemporary Dutch society is rooted (De Jong, 2001, p.30).

When Dutch fashion brands use the *logic of reconstitution*, they do not refer to the age of the brands origin, but to the origin of the Dutch nation. A recurrent method to hark back to the 17th century is by using the stylistic features of the paintings by the Dutch Old Masters like Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer en Jan Steen. A clear example of this is the photo series *Golden Age* by the renowned Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf for the Dutch fashion brand People of the Labyrinths (P.O.T.L., founded in 1984) (Figure 3). The P.O.T.L. F/W collection of 2005/2006 was inspired by the Dutch 17th century and Olaf portrait the designs using the same light, compositions and themes as the paintings by the Dutch Masters. In the same way that Johannes Vermeer placed his female models often in front of a window through which light shines into the room and places the woman in a 'spotlight', Olaf places this model in front of a 17th century style window, against white walls and next to a chair, which is reminiscent of the chairs painted by Vermeer.

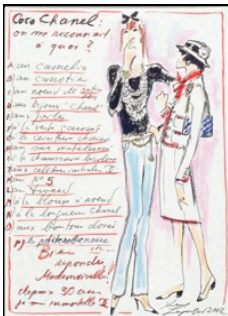
### Strategy 2: Stylistic repertoire

A second way in which the heritage of a brand is put to use is through reworking and transforming their stylistic repertoire. The stylistic repertoire of the brand, which usually comes from the product itself, or in other words the classics of a brand, are rearranged and brought up to date (Remaury, 2004). A well-known stylistic repertoire is that of Chanel, which Karl Lagerfeld has used ever since his appointment as artistic director at the fashion house in 1983 to develop new designs within this easy distinguishable framework. Lagerfeld has illustrated these 'elements for an immediate identification of Chanel' in a drawing



#### Photos

- 1 Advertisement campaign by Louis Vuitton featuring Catherine Deneuve, 2007.
- 2 Advertisement campaign by Louis Vuitton, 1994.
- 3 People of the Labyrinths, F/W 2005/2006, photo from the series 'Golden Age' by Erwin Olaf.



Generally known is the *Fashion Show* collection (FW 2007/2008) by Viktor & Rolf for which they took inspiration from the traditional dress of the Netherlands. According to the Dutch quality newspaper, *Trouw*, they felt the need to go back to their roots, back to their native country (Rheenen, 2007). Interesting in this context is that they took their inspiration from different regional dress styles and combined them, which is a common method of working among Dutch designers. This underlines the multi-layered symbolism; although the traditional dress differs regionally, they are all acknowledged as expressing Dutchness. Viktor & Rolf used – among other styles and techniques – Staphorster stipwerk (a painting technique from Staphorst) (Figure 7, 8, 9), Indian Chintz (which is a highly popular textile in Dutch traditional dress)<sup>2</sup> (Figure 10, 11) and red coral chokers typical for the dress of Zeeland (Figure 12, 13).



**13** Wentke (traditional long, waisted coat from Indian Chintz), mid 18<sup>th</sup> century

Another example in which we clearly see this element of 'the common people' is Francisco van Benthum's F/W collection of 2008/2009 *HOPE*. This collection was inspired by Dutch fishermen and showed several features of their traditional dress, especially that from the village of Volendam (Figure 14). Van Benthum uses the traditional caps, the wide, peg-top trousers and classic necklines (Figure 15). For an accompanying photo shoot the models are shot in black and white and combined with pictures of grey

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skies and stormy seas (Figure 16). In these images the models are cast against Dutch weather phenomena, which act as a foil, whereby a certain mood is expressed. It shows the sea as a dangerous place and the fishermen as hardworking, hardy men, instead of men of leisure, who go sailing for recreational reasons; as working class instead of leisure class.

### Strategy 3: Timeless emblems

In addition to its stylistic repertoire luxury brands possess a collection of timeless emblems, which can give products a sense of belonging to a brand, without necessarily staying within the framework of the stylistic heritage. These timeless emblems like logo's, symbols or distinctive patterns stay relatively stable, as to 'change without changing', because a sudden change might obscure the message. As a result of the recent race for innovation the emblems have become more and more a way of ensuring the continuity of the brand heritage (Remaury, 2004).

The Dutch nation has a collection of timeless emblems which consists of – among others – wooden clogs, the Dutch national flag, the colours orange (in reference to the name of the royal family), red, white, and blue (the colours of the national flag), windmills, cheese, tulips, ice skating (tour skating and race skating, not figure skating), the Dutch landscape (polder), Delft earthenware, Dutch cuisine (Dutch smoked sausage, Dutch stew), the (16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> century) shipping trade and Frau Antje (the cheese girl). What is important here is that these symbols are often used outside their conventional context, while still bestowing the aura of Dutch cultural heritage to the products.

Klavers & Van Engelen have used a ruff –although this type of stiff white collars where worn throughout Europe from the late 16th and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, they remained highly fashionable among the Dutch regents in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century (Calasibetta & Tortora, 2003) and therefore they are seen as an icon of the Dutch national heritage –as a starting point, but have abstracted it to the level where a ruff makes up an entire dress (Figure 17, 18). The ruff is used as an icon, just as the wooden clogs with heels from Viktor & Rolf (Figure 7, 8), but there have been many more instances of the use of Dutch icons in fashion in recent years.

The 2011 S/S collection of SIS, the diffusion label of the design duo Spijkers & Spijkers, was inspired by a Dutch folk song from around 1775 *Daar was laatst een meisje loos*. The song tells about a girl who dresses like a boy to become a sailor, but is found out about and becomes the captain's sweetheart (Geheugen van Nederland, n.d.). Consequently, the show started with a film of moving clouds, and the show was accompanied by music by Enya: the song Sail Away. The clothing itself had all kinds of maritime references: the main colours were sea colours like plain blue, green and white and seashell prints and buttons. The grand finale of the show consisted of three dresses with large 17th century sailing ships on them in blue and white (Figure 19). While the cut of these dresses have nothing to do with the Dutch stylistic repertoire of traditional dress, these last three dresses still referred clearly to the Dutch national heritage through the emblem of the Delft Earthenware; it looked like the models were wearing traditional tile picture with sailing ships, in themselves icons of Dutch heritage (Figure 20). Thus we see several Dutch icons –the Delft Earthenware, the sailing ships– outside of their traditional context of ceramics and seascapes, but still bestowing the modern dresses with Dutch heritage.

These are all quite traditional emblems of Dutch culture, but Dutch designers also take the minimalist and conceptual form of Dutch modernism in art and design as a source of inspiration (Teunissen, 2006, Van den Berg, 2008). Lingerie designer Marlies Dekkers, for example, did not only design a collection named *royal blue delft* for S/S 2007 and threw a 'So Dutch' opening event of her Paris store in 2006 (Figure 21, 22), in Dutch quality newspaper *Het Parool* she also describes her style as Dutch –sober but smart– and ascribes this to the polder landscape with its clear lines, and gets a lot from her inspiration from the work of Dutch artists like Mondriaan and Rietveld (Lampe, 2008).

Other contemporary emblems are the postbags of the PTT (Dutch mail), which designer Jan Taminiau used for his *Postzak* collection for S/S 2005 (Figure 23). Here we see again references to everyday life, instead of the life of the Dutch elite.



21 *Royal Blue Delft*, Marlies Dekkers, S/S 2007

22 *So Dutch*, opening ceremony of Marlies Dekkers' Paris store, 2007

23 Jan Taminiau, dress from *Postzak* (postbag) collection, S/S 2005

### Strategy 4: Juxtaposing past and present

A fourth heritage strategy that brands make use of is the *confrontational strategy*: an explicit juxtaposition between the past and the present. This approach makes visible what customers have in mind when they buy a product of a certain brand –the narrative of the brand; a story about its ori-



Photos

17 *Molenteenkraagjurk*, Klavers & Van Engelen, F/W 2008/2009

18 Ruff, c. 1615-35, collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

19 SIS by Spijkers & Spijkers, S/S 2011

20 Tile picture depicting the schip Twee Gebroeders by Dirk Danser, 1748



gins, its craftsmanship and the age of the brand, while at the same time expecting a contemporary design. This contrast between heritage and innovation is most often applied at the points of sale, but also in the press and advertising (Remaury, 2004). A recent international example is the 2010 campaign by Gucci which contrasts original black and white photographs from 1953 of Gucci artisans in its historic Via delle Caldaie building in Florence with the title *Forever Now* (Figure 24). The juxtaposition between the historic photograph and the 'NOW', becomes a bridge between the brands past, present, and future, through the caption:

*"The man. The passion. The dream. Guccio Gucci lived the artisan's life of Florence in 1921. Authentic. Enduring. Dedicated to perfection. His spirit inspires our traditions today. The beauty of what he began nurtured by generations of craftsmen for 90 years. His desire to create what lasts forever moves each of us. Touching our past as we craft our future. Compelling us to carry his iconic legacy forward –now and forever"* (Gucci advertisement, *Forever Now*, 2010).

A comparison between Dutch cases and the luxury houses as discussed by Remaury is complicated by the fact that, while this strategy is most often applied at the points of sale and in advertising, only a few Dutch designers actually own their own stores, nor do they have their own shop-in-shops at department stores, nor even a corner in specialised boutiques. And, as the budget to make use of extensive advertisement campaigns also lack, they are limited in creating their own brand universe.

A clear juxtaposition, however, between the Dutch past and its present are the *Pearls from Makkum* project (2006), a collaboration between Royal Tichelaar Makkum and fashion designer Alexander van Slobbe. Royal Tichelaar is the oldest company of the Netherlands, since 1594 this family business has specialised in pottery, especially the white and blue Delft earthenware. While their common ground is the dedication to craftsmanship, quality materials and heritage, Van Slobbes vision takes the Royal Tichelaar style into the fashion arena. *The Pearls from Makkum* are a series of porcelain pearls, which come in different colours and decorations, like one with the traditional windmill pattern in white and blue, and can be worn on a silk ribbon (Tichelaar, n.d.) (Figures 25, 26). Van Slobbe meant to design a Dutch product, made from local materials and inspired by Dutch culture, in which wearing pearls on a ribbon is an ancient tradition, and where the fishermen of the Zuiderzee would buy their wives a single pearl when business was good (Van den Berg, 2008, p.51-53). The Dutch cultural heritage is stressed through the narrative of craftsmanship, quality and history, while this is visually enhanced through the patterns and also by photographs in which earrings from the same line are shot in the style of Vermeer's *The girl with the pearl earring*, which was Van Slobbes source of inspiration (Figures 27, 28). At the same time the innovative design of the 'pearls' is very contemporary, and looks like nothing worn in traditional dress. Here we see again an association with the Dutch folk culture; that of the fishermen of the Zuiderzee.

### Strategy 5: Museum and/or gallery exhibition method

The last strategy as described by Remaury (2004) is a direct heritage policy in which the brand creates spaces to display its heritage, or in other words, it opens a museum or designs gallery exhibitions especially for its brand. Internationally renowned are the fashion exhibitions of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and les Arts Décoratifs, which have shown the heritage of many fashion houses. Well-known examples of specialised museums are those of Hermes, Louis Vuitton and Yves Saint Laurent. However, having ones own museum does not exclude the option of gallery exhibitions, as the recent exhibition (October 2010/February 2011) *Voyage en Capitale, Louis Vuitton et Paris* on the history of Louis Vuitton at Musée Carnavalet in Paris makes clear.

The story told through an exhibition ranges from purely historical to confrontational strategies, as described in the above. A clear example of the latter strategy within a Dutch context is the exhibition *Gone with the Wind*, which was on show in 2009 at the *Zuiderzee museum* in Enkhuizen. This is a combination of an open-air museum and an indoor museum dedicated to documenting and showing how people – mainly fishermen and farming communities – used to live and work around the Zuiderzee between 1880 and 1930. Thus, this fashion exhibition was placed within a Dutch folk culture setting, instead of a 'high art' setting. The exhibition was curated by Alexander van Slobbe and Franciso van Benthum and was meant to explore Dutch traditional dress thematically based on the idea *from craftsmanship to abstraction*. They asked more than fifty Dutch designers, stylists, fashion photographers, and product designers to create installations taking the traditional dress collection of the museum as a starting point and centred around Dutch themes like the Old Master Johannes Vermeer, flowers, *De scheepsjongens van Bontekoe* (a children's adventure book from 1924 by Johan Fabricius, based on a ship's log of a VOC captain on a group of young boys, who join the VOC as cabin boys) and Oranjefeesten (parties in honour



Photos

- 24 *Forever Now*, Gucci advertisement campaign, 2010
- 25 *Pearls from Makkum*, Alexander van Slobbe for Royal Tichelaar Makkum, 2006
- 26 *Pearls from Makkum* in Delft earthenware style, with Dutch landscapes featuring farms and windmills, Alexander van Slobbe for Royal Tichelaar Makkum, 2006
- 27 *Pearls from Makkum*, Alexander van Slobbe for Royal Tichelaar Makkum, 2006
- 28 *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, Johannes Vermeer, c. 1665-66, Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis

of the Dutch royal house). The pieces of the museum collection –the source of inspiration– were placed next to their contemporary counterparts, opening a dialogue between the past and the present, heritage and innovation.

A similar method was applied in collaboration between the *Zeeuws Museum* and designer Monique van Heist during 2010 in the exhibition *Mode met Monique* (Fashion with Monique). The designer was asked to draw a parallel between the heritage of the museum and her *Hello Fashion* project, which is a continuous collection of Monique van Heist's classics by which she challenges the fashion system. The collection is permanent, grows slowly at a random pace, unconcerned with the traditional fashion cycle and will be available for unlimited time. Thus, denouncing fashion's short-lived glory as suggested by commercial forces (Monique van Heist, 2009). This slowly growing, timeless, and classic collection has the same characteristics as the traditional clothing collections; where men and women would not so much replace their clothing, but add, as the different pieces were timeless. Here, we see the same dialogue between an innovative fashion project and Dutch clothing traditions; the present and the past.

However, it is not only the traditional elements of Dutch heritage that are drawn on by Dutch designers. Marlies Dekkers finds her inspiration in the work of Mondrian and Rietveld and during her *15 years of Marlies Dekkers* exhibition at the Kunsthall in Rotterdam (2008), she placed her lingerie next to their artworks. And thus, opposing a more recent Dutch cultural heritage and contemporary design (Lampe, 2008).

## Conclusion

Turning back to the central question of this paper; "What are the visual and narrative ways in which the heritage of a brand is put to use in the global strategy of the brand offer –from the products themselves to advertising and point of sale?" we have seen that the main strategies applied by Dutch luxury brands are predominantly the same as the those described by Remaury (2004).

There are, however, three main differences between Dutch luxury brands and the established international brands. Firstly, the Dutch do not apply these strategies to their brand heritage, –as it is as good as non-existent– but they take their inspiration from outside the fashion arena and turn to their national heritage to give their work a sense of longevity. Secondly, where the established luxury brands always refer to the world of the aristocracy and/or the rich and the famous, the Dutch often refer to Dutch folk culture; the world of the common people, and even a culture that has been looked down upon for the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The third difference is a result of their interest in Dutch folk culture; while national dress is of course not completely 'free' of fashion; the 'new' is not a central goal. Within traditional dress characteristics like timelessness and durability are more important than ephemerality.

At first hand this seems an unbridgeable gap, and leaves the question whether these Dutch brands aspire to position themselves as luxury brands after all? I would like to argue that they do see and position themselves as luxury brands, but their understanding of the concept of luxury is somewhat different than that of the time-honoured luxury brands.

Lipovetsky (2007) has described *postmodern luxury* as something which combines the traditional desire to distinguish yourself socially through your appearance, with a narcissistic dimension: your own opinion of yourself, your own intimate experience. And, he states that this second element has become more important in recent years. I argue that it is this dual character of postmodern luxury, which can explain the differences between the established luxury brands and the Dutch ones.

In the use of their heritage the established luxury brands still lean more heavily on a traditional type of luxury, which is based upon a battle for prestige. This is not surprising, as this explicit elitist method has been part of the brand's history for many years, and therefore cannot just be discarded. This also clarifies the less important role that the association with the aristocracy or economical and cultural elite plays for Dutch luxury brands; while they do associate with the upperclass of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this association is not part of their brand heritage. In addition to this, according to economic historian Jan de Vries, a new type of luxury developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands, which was not based on a royal court, but on urban society and which he characterises by an integrating rather than by a differentiating effect. The basic forms of expressing status and achieving comfort were remarkably similar between city and country, and between rich and poor. It was the cost and specific quality, rather than the types of objects and their general form that differed (De Vries, 1999). Thus, while the appearance was more or less the same, the (traditional) luxury was in the craftsmanship and the materials.

The lack of an elitist tradition in combination with a lessening importance of this 'prestige' element, make that the Dutch are not in any way limited to explore different features of Dutch culture, such as folk culture. Thus, when compared, the Dutch seem to focus more on the narcissistic dimension –or personal experience –of postmodern luxury; which considers association with the elite as less important. Their

conception of luxury is one of *emotional luxury*, which is characterised by intimate experiences (Lipovetsky, 2007).

Lipovetsky (2007) also describes a new need for timelessness and durability, which the established luxury brands find in their craftsmanship, and which Dutch brands find in their traditional dress, with its ancient techniques as well as the timelessness –from a fashion perspective– of its silhouettes.

Concluding, we can state that although the Dutch use the same strategies, the heritage they refer to is very different: they use a past from outside fashion, a past which is not necessarily connected to the elite and which endorses characteristics like timelessness and durability instead of the ‘new’, which is so central to fashion.

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## Notes

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2. Indian Chintz was imported by the VOC (Dutch East India Company) from India from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From 1660 onwards chintz became highly fashionable, first with the elite and soon also with farmers, fishermen and craftsmen. After 1770 chintz went out of fashion, but remained a standard element of Dutch traditional dress, especially within the regions surrounding the Zuiderzee (later the IJsselmeer). While originally an exotic textile it was soon adapted, and is nowadays seen as an icon of Dutch identity, much like the white and blue Delft earthenware, which is originally based on Chinese porcelain. A contemporary use of chintz within a Dutch context can be found in the designs by Dutch fashion brand Oilily (Arts, 2010, pp.50-68).